



THE

INQUIRER

£1 | Issue 7976 | 30 November 2019

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



PROCESSED

DEC 10 2019

LIBRARY

Inside this issue...

A call to divest from fossil fuel

Dystopia or Utopia?

It's a Funny Old World

www.inquirer.org.uk

Advent: much more than a choccy a day

Caroline Cormack looks at the bittersweet season

THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

Established in 1842, The Inquirer is the oldest nonconformist religious newspaper.

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Editor: M Colleen Burns MA
46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich
NR4 6UF T: 01603 505281

E: inquirer@btinternet.com

Proofreader: Sarah Reynolds

Cover: Shutterstock photo

Articles express the views of their writers. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the writer's original work or be attributed appropriately.

Annual subscriptions are £38 with discounts for bulk orders. Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'.

Write to: Steven Bisby

71 Earlesmere Avenue, Balby, Doncaster,
DN4 0QD T: 07764 486711

E: admin@inquirer.org.uk

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £95 plus VAT. Contact the editor for details.

Births, marriages and deaths: 50p a word + VAT.

Find out more about Unitarians

The General Assembly, Essex Hall
1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY

T: 0207 2402384

E: info@unitarian.org.uk

www.unitarian.org.uk

Inquiring Words...

It will be over by the time you read this, but as I write I am in the midst of Thanksgiving preparations. It is marked this year on 28 November. We are expecting 20 for dinner and I've got lists, recipes and seating plans on my mind. It's a wonderful holiday which I am happy to bring to these shores from my native America. (It's become such a part of our friends' lives that one young man who has celebrated with us since he was 5 came home from university at Sheffield to be with us last year.)

The really lovely thing about Thanksgiving is that it's all about being together and enjoying wonderful food – grateful for the people in our lives. Without the pressures (and perhaps disappointments) of present giving and expectations of perfection created by adverts, Thanksgiving just is. The moment I sit at our table among our gathered friends and family is my favourite of the year.

The traditional story of Thanksgiving is that the pilgrims introduced the idea of thanking God for harvest to the Native people of the Americas. It fits in with the Christian narrative of bringing religion to faithless tribes. But I suspect there was much more to it than that. For the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people I know, gratitude is the centre of their religion – what they call their way of life.

So in the moments just before we sit at our table we read 'A Native American Good Morning Message', a children's book of a version of the Mohawk Thanksgiving address written by Chief Jake Swamp. The address is recited at every important gathering among the Haudenosaunee nations. It is beautiful and can be long. Below is an excerpt by Doug George-Kanentiio who puts it in context saying, 'The Mohawks, and our fellow Iroquois, believe the Earth, and all which dwells upon her, do, in fact, hear our words. We know plants, water, animals respond to the human voice whether we speak with goodness or throw about words of harm. It is my hope that at Thanksgiving we may put aside our animosities and nurture each other with words of harmony.'

We see our elder brother, the Sun who brings light and warmth. Each new day we see his love for our Mother; he never fails to perform his duties and we are in gratitude.

In the night time sky dwells Grandmother Moon. She watches over the waters of the Earth and gives us her light: it is she who oversees the birth of all life. We send her our best words of thanks.

We notice there are other life beings in the night time, the Stars. They bring about the dew on the plants and also determine how each life form will be. They form the path to the Creator's land which we will follow when we leave our Mother. We are thankful for their beauty and for guiding us as we move about.

We are thankful for the great teachers and elders in our societies, those who have wisdom and love for us. They give to all of us their experience and their knowledge. To them we express our thanksgiving. We have spiritual beings who bring us messages and instructions from the spirit world. They guide us throughout life and we are thankful for their being.

We have our best words of thanksgiving to the Creator, that being who has given us the gift of life. We have, on Mother Earth, all we need to be happy and to live in peace for such is the great abiding love the Creator has for human beings.

We are here before the universe, with each other, for each other. We are brought together, as families, friends, clans, communities and nations to sing, to dance, to celebrate as best we can the gift of life. We say to each other, to those who have gone to the spirit world and to those yet unborn, that life itself is a great Thanksgiving. So be it, we are of one mind.

MC Burns

Caroline Cormack traces the transition from remembrance to birth

Following the path to tenderness

Advent has been described as that time when we move from a season of remembrance for the dead, into a time to prepare for that which is to be born. The definition of Advent is 'the coming of an important person or event.' It is a time to prepare, to make ready, offering us space 'for peaceful contemplation, for finding oneself, even among all the outer preparations which may occupy us.'

Advent begins Sunday, falling this year on St Andrew's day. He connects well with this time of year. Quoting from the **Scotland.org** website it says: 'Despite his relatively humble upbringing, St Andrew was known throughout his life for being a generous man. St Andrew's philosophy was incredibly simple: take what you have and share it with those less fortunate! He became known as a strong and fair man who took every opportunity to help others whenever he could. His fairness and generosity have always struck a chord with the Scots for thousands of years and to this day they still remain important aspects of how we treat others. Anyone who has visited Scotland can vouch that this co-operative spirit is still alive here today. If you're lost, there's always someone there happy to point you in the right direction. In fact, Scotland is known around the world for its incredibly warm welcome and friendliness. It's one of the many things that keeps people coming back to visit.'

His desire to help those who are less fortunate is also embodied in the many social enterprises that are thriving across Scotland.' St Andrew's day relates to the beginning of this season which at its best is about giving, receiving and sharing. It all sounds so lovely; you would expect Advent to be full of happy expectation and excitement. However, real life doesn't always reflect this rosy image for many reasons.

At a physical, psychological and spiritual level, this is not an easy time of the year. In nature this often feels like the death of the earth. Many trees are now bare, the earth feels quite frozen, flowers are few and far between. The cold affects our bodies and recent scientific research does seem to confirm that

"At a physical, psychological and spiritual level, this is not an easy time of the year. In nature this often feels like the death of the earth."

cooler temperatures result in 'a more sluggish immune response and a greater susceptibility to infection.' In the book *All Year Round* the authors Ann Druitt, Christine Fynes-Clinton and Marije Rowling point out, 'It is not unusual for the adult to experience times of struggle and isolation during Advent' but that we can be helped by children's confident trust that life is good, and that everything will be all right. Their excited anticipation can help us know we are on the path towards light and joy and tenderness.

We may stumble in the darkness and be more aware of what we have lost in

life. The festive season can bring up bittersweet feelings. It is a time based so much on connection with loved ones, with hope, with celebration. Therefore, those who have lost loved ones, who do not have a secure home, who have little to give and less to receive, this season can feel overwhelmingly sad and painful. Even for those of us who have much to be grateful for, Advent may mark the beginning of a time of increased pressure, in terms of finances, time and family and social expectations. So it feels even more important to stay in touch with spiritual meaning and symbolism. In ancient times, people connected with the solstices and equinoxes, recognising them as vital transitions which could help them cope with change in life. The Christian festivals follow the pagan ones within a few days – 'The universe is carried by natural forces towards the four sun-junctures, towards these moments of testing, of turning point. There, like cosmic midwives, the Christian festivals oversee the transition, bringing the breath of new life into world harmonies. At Christmastime, we celebrate the new life of the earth's own sun – the Light of the World – that which, through the good will

Continued on page 4 >



“That idea of tender care feels so welcome in a world which can often be harsh and lonely and frightening.”

Shown left: Advent candles by Myriam Zilles

Continued from page 3 >

of men and women, forever shines in the darkness, and will not be overcome.’ (*All Year Round*)

This time of year gives us a real choice spiritually. This is when, very clearly, we have a choice of two paths. I have gone down each path at different times, and still do.

One path is based more on fear and judgement. It is a more forceful position, based on expectations and pressure. It usually results in us becoming overtired and grumpy as Christmas approaches and more anxious about it being a ‘happy Christmas’. Have I got enough presents for people? Did I remember everyone on my Christmas card list? Will people like what I’ve got them? Should I go and visit more neighbours/relatives, etc? Should I invite more people round? What about charities and helping others more?

We might find ourselves getting more irritated by others and judging them. Dr Rachel Remen points out that ‘our own self-judgement or the judgement of other people can stifle our life force, its spontaneity and natural expression. Unfortunately, judgement is commonplace...Judgement does not only take the form of criticism. Approval is also a form of judgement ... to seek approval is to have no resting place, no sanctuary.’ She goes on to point out that we often spend our lives striving for approval – and yet it cannot be trusted as it can be withdrawn at any time. Christmas can exacerbate these feelings with more expectation that we will provide a happy time for everyone – as well as having a wonderful time ourselves, just like the adverts seem to show.

The other path is one that keeps following that star – that holds a peace and a tenderness at the heart of this season, that allows ourselves compassion for, and acceptance of, our limitations. We remember the joy and hope and keep that within our sights even as we queue in the busiest shops or make the endless lists of ingredients for Christmas dinner. We hold others and their hopes with tenderness and acceptance, without trying to change them to suit ourselves. It is a tall order, one that most of us will never fully achieve but brings us a much deeper softness and understanding if we consciously try to tread that path.

Unitarian views on Jesus, and therefore how we might feel about his birth, are very varied and complex. Margaret Wilkinson says that many Unitarians see Jesus as ‘the supreme example of the

way in which... the Eternal Spirit of love and power operates through human lives’, a ‘practical loving Jesus who has inspired generations of Unitarians to involve themselves in all kinds of service to the communities in which they live.’ (*Unitarian Perspectives on Contemporary Religious Thought*)

I am intrigued and comforted by the story of Jesus’ birth, but I also see this time as celebrating *all* birth, *all* innocence, *all* hope and childlike trust which this story evokes.

When my children were little, I was more able to connect with that because of their focus on the excitement and hope. Every year I made something called ‘Mary’s star path’ to celebrate Advent and I still do that, despite the fact that I usually move Mary and her donkey along the path! Doing this connects me very deeply with the mysteries of life. It connects me with the hope that young couples have when they are about to start a family. It connects me with the yearning to find that place where you feel safe and ready to face anything. It connects me with the gifts of this universe – the stars, the plants, the animals. It connects me with faith and trust that life is following its natural course.

The comfort and familiarity of verses from some of our carols, particularly the ones for children can help link us to the simple joy and love we all need in our lives. I love the last verse of ‘Away in a Manger’ – ‘Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay, Close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care

And fit us all for heaven to live with thee there.’

That idea of tender care feels so welcome in a world which can often be harsh and lonely and frightening. The mystical poet, St John of the Cross wrote this short poem:

Tenderly, I now touch all things,

Knowing one day we will part.

He writes so profoundly of the recognition that all of our lives are precious. None of us will be here forever; so let us all hold our fellow companions with care and tenderness knowing we each have our challenges and vulnerabilities. Dr Ewan Kelly, Director of NHS Healthcare chaplaincy in Glasgow, points out that ‘to be human is to be vulnerable; it is to know the experience of having cracks, being cracked open and fear breaking completely. Yet, paradoxically, it is through our

Continued on page 5 >

Advent

By Sabrina Lewins

Standing here, waiting,
How many times have you waited,
For a train,
A friend,
The sun to break through a cloud
And give glory to your photograph,
Or rain to awaken your thirsty garden,
Someone to come home?
Longing for action to make this dragging time
end,
You shift your feet, adjust your body,
Nothing else seems important but the waiting.

Whatever you hope for, whatever your dream may
be,
Is it good enough to endure this torment?
This loss of freedom, this unwanted stillness?
And yet you must wait, to hope, to believe,
in the coming.
Watching the scene as it changes,
Entering into this time fully,
You are here-now.
And you realise,
That you are not just waiting,
All this time
You are living!

Stay connected in Advent

Continued from page 4 >

woundedness and imperfection that hope and light might not only be glimpsed but grace shared in the caring relationships we form with others.' He feels that Christ showed the example of being vulnerable and wounded – a 'compassionate laying open of self'. We are vulnerable physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially and all of our life experiences may expose our insecurities.

Staying openly loving and compassionate with others, whilst we look after ourselves is not always easy. Ewan Kelly points this out: 'Unconditional, compassionate loving is also hazardous for the carer. In giving we may indeed receive – fulfilment, meaning, new understanding or the challenge of a different perspective. Yet, in loving we risk – rejection, failure and disappointment. In loving, we are drained and diminished, rendered vulnerable. Unconditional loving... wounds us.'

Advent and the Christmas season can be a wonderful reminder to come back to the place of love and softness within ourselves. Father Jim McManus, a redemptorist priest, encourages us to find inner peace. He implores us to let go of resentments and bitterness. Jim says that the word 'resent' comes from the Latin words *resentire*, which means 'to feel again.' He says if we dwell on resentful memories, we feel the hurt from them again, and just keep hurting ourselves. We imprison ourselves in pain and past trauma.

Instead we can choose a peace of the spirit, we can choose to live in an affirming way, valuing ourselves, seeing ourselves as children of the Divine.

Advent is a time for us to take some time to sink into a deeper place within, letting go with each out breath.

We are about to enter a time of preparation. What are you preparing for? What resentment do you need to let go of to care more deeply for yourself?

What tenderness in yourself would you like to access?

How will you stay connected with love and softness in the next few busy weeks?

*"What resentment
do you need to let go
of to care more deeply for
yourself?"*



Caroline Cormack

The Rev Caroline Cormack is an Interfaith minister serving Aberdeen Unitarians.

The sun shines above the clouds

November brought the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. At that time, in 1989 my son Nick was a student in France and he and a busload of his friends whizzed across Europe to Berlin to witness the historic activity and liberation revelry. He wrote a report on that visit which the *Inquirer* published, and I revisited it for the 25th anniversary. The *Guardian* has now published a collection of local people's stories from that time, how they fared in those heady days around the breeched and crumbling wall. All East Berliners at that time received a West Berlin government welcome grant of 100 deutschmarks. One writer, who was an 11-year-old at that time, remembered that the first thing he did with his money was buy a library card.

* * *



Photo by Manfred Richter

Time to start writing my Christmas cards. My favourite kind has a photograph of a robin, one of the many symbols of Christmas. I particularly enjoy sending these to friends in North America, to remind them that *this* is a robin, not the creature they call a robin, which is red-breasted but is the size of and a relative of the thrush. The American robin is a symbol of spring's return. The popular song tells of the 'red, red, robin', who 'comes bob, bob, bobbin' along', in spring, adding the line, 'Wake up, wake up, you sleepy head', a phrase which echoes the song of the robin. In Canada, to be the one who sees the first robin, back from its migration to the warmer south, brings you good luck. I much prefer our robin, a cheerful sight in the winter's snow, so for Christmas I send them as a suitable symbol of joy. They are theologically acceptable for Christians, with folk stories about how it got its red breast. They are a joyous sight and sound for non-Christians too. And good for me, as most supposedly religious Christmas cards are not to my taste.

* * *

I expect that many readers become irritated by the loose advertising leaflets that drop out of newspapers, including, occasionally, the *Inquirer*. These almost always advertise charities, and I urge readers to resist scrapping a recent one which came from the Ethical Shop. A colourful catalogue with an extraordinary range of Christmas gift items, including Fairtrade vegan Cotswold fudge and hot air balloon bamboo socks, a bamboo Bluetooth mini speaker and a gin and tonic

FUNNY OLD WORLD

By John Midgley



bath bomb, plus a Women of the World calendar. The Ethical Shop is owned by *New Internationalist* magazine. If you buy from it, please indicate that you received the catalogue via the *Inquirer*. That might encourage them to advertise with us again. In my home we have treated ourselves to a shipping forecast tea towel. It has a map of the British Isles with the sea areas clearly marked. Remember the late-night radio broadcast of the shipping forecast: 'Dogger, Fisher, German Bight' etc? And the melody *Sailing By*? I once tried writing a hymn to that tune but thought better of it.

* * *

Thanks go to Rev Derek Smith for reminding us that 2020 will bring the 400th anniversary of the landing of the *Mayflower*, which took the Pilgrims to North America. Plymouth Massachusetts is a very historically minded town, and some years ago I enjoyed a visit to the replica of the *Mayflower*, then to the Plimoth Plantation, an open-air living history museum. It replicates the original settlement established in the 17th century by the English colonists, who migrated to America to seek religious separation from the Church of England. They held services on the *Mayflower* and then at a fort on Burial Hill from 1621 until 1648. They then established a church in Plymouth which became a parish church of Massachusetts. A schism developed in 1801 when the majority of the congregation adopted Unitarianism, as did many of the other state churches in Massachusetts. The Congregationalist dissenters broke away to form the nearby Church of the Pilgrimage. So, if you make an anniversary visit to Plymouth, make sure you go into the right church!

* * *

As for me, my 2020 plans present me with a dilemma. October 26th to 1st November, the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists will meet in Montreal, Canada. All are invited and I am determined to go, but how to travel? I cannot face crossing the Atlantic in a sailing ship like Greta Thunberg, but we are being encouraged to reduce flights in jet planes. Would just one transatlantic trip per year be all right, please? My dream is that one day, the scientists and aero-engineers will build a solar-powered jumbo jet. Well, the sun is always shining above the clouds, so why not? Or am I mad? Merry Christmas everybody!

Stephen Lingwood calls
for 'respect for all creation'

Divest from fossil fuel



Shown above: Oil companies continue to seek new sources of oil. Photo by John R Perry

It feels like the climate crisis has really hit the headlines in the last year. Of course we've known about this crisis for a very long time, and many people have been raising concerns for decades. But since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its last significant report in 2018 it feels like something has shifted. That shift hasn't come from politicians but from people, most notably the international school strike movement, and Extinction Rebellion.

The voices of denial have been silenced. Everyone can see the climate is now dangerously shifting due to human activity, and the debate is about what we can do about it and how fast. Everyone is now paying lip service to the need for climate action. But the great obstacle to this is, and always has been, the fossil fuel companies. As reported by the *Guardian*, the largest five stock market listed oil and gas companies spend nearly £153m a year lobbying to delay, control or block policies to tackle climate change, according to a report by InfluenceMap, a research organisation which analyses how companies and trade associations impact climate-motivated policy. (See: <https://bit.ly/33aMXR6>)

Though fuel companies often talk about their investment in green technologies, they are still spending billions on exploring new oil and gas sources. To prevent the worst of the climate crisis and be compliant with the Paris climate agreement these reserves must be kept in the ground. But these companies' business plans are based on burning them.

The divestment movement is about recognising that it is no longer ethical to invest money in the fossil fuel industry, which shows little or no sign of attempting to change its behaviour to respond to the risks of climate change. It is about recognising that one of the most effective means we have to bring about change in the world is our money, and how we invest it. The divestment movement is growing. By March 2018, more than 850 institutions with a total of £4.4 billion of assets under management had made commitments to divest from fossil fuels. This includes many universities, local councils, pension funds, and religious groups – including the World Council of Churches, the Methodist Church, the Quakers, and the United Reform Church.

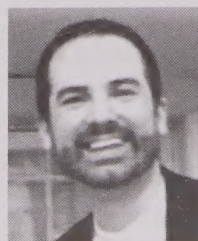
On social issues such as same-sex marriage Unitarians were ahead of the curve, but on this one we are well behind the social justice commitments of other groups. The General Assembly periodically passes a resolution of concern on climate change,

but the last one required no real action of any of us. We have failed to recognise that we have real power to create change through the money we have invested. We have so far failed to put our money where our mouth is.

Given this, I write to give as much notice as possible that the congregation of Cardiff Unitarians / Undodiaid Caerdydd are intending to propose this motion at the Annual Meetings in 2020:

That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, mindful of the climate crisis, and of its object to 'promote... the service of humanity and respect for all creation' instructs the Executive Committee to:

- Not invest in fossil fuel companies whose total turnover is more than 10% derived from the extraction and/or supply of fossil fuels, including thermal coal, natural gas and oil.
- Complete the divestment required to fulfil this decision by the time of the General Assembly Annual Meetings in 2025.
- Refocus the General Assembly's investment portfolio by scaling up investment in renewable energy and clean technologies.
- Strongly encourage and support all Unitarian congregations and funds to do the same.



Stephen Lingwood

Stephen Lingwood is Unitarian minister with Cardiff Unitarians / Undodiaid Caerdydd.

Dystopia or Utopia?

Alan Ruston calls on religious liberals to choose

Are you amongst those who recall that TV panel game, 'Call My Bluff' which first appeared on radio as 'My Word'? Those who played it were given an obscure word from the depths of the massive Oxford English Dictionary. Three of the panellists in turn presented and argued for different definitions of the word but only one was correct. The other panellists had to guess the right one through asking questions and then vote which one was correct. The number of unknown English words which arose was amazing, almost never ending.

What attracted viewers to this game arises from a fascination with obscure words and their meaning. I'm one of those who on seeing an unknown word writes it down to look up later and hopefully add to my mental dictionary.

One word I encountered some years ago that was new to me then, but is now often used in the press and elsewhere, was dystopia. The meaning is quite simple – it's the opposite of 'utopia' which means an imaginary place that's absolutely perfect. The word utopia was first coined by Sir Thomas More in a book of that name in the 1550s. Dystopia is its opposite – seeing imaginary circumstances, or not so imaginary places, that are completely horrible. The word was created by the philosopher cum politician John Stuart Mill in March 1868, when speaking in the House of Commons about prophets of doom and gloom. He said:

It is too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.

However, the practice of dystopia, or seeing everything turning out extremely badly, has a longer history. The Book of Revelation in the New Testament piles woe upon woe. On the day of judgment when the seventh seal is broken, storms of hail and fire mingled with blood run down upon mankind with angels flying about shrieking, 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth.'

In medieval times the Church didn't want people thinking for themselves, so stressed the day of judgement, creating fear that not doing as they were told would merit retribution. In more recent times, some commentators have created the fear that technological advances could reduce human beings to little more than cogs in a machine. Nothing new here, for Charlie Chaplin satirised this idea in his film *Modern Times* in 1936. Similarly, doomsday scenarios during the Cold War probably fostered dystopia – we're getting used to the word now – to gain the upper hand in popular consciousness. Just the pressing of a button could lead to nuclear war destroying most cities and poisoning the survivors. Dystopia was very present, and those desperate nuclear concerns have not disappeared. Today we have Mr Trump creating a similar atmosphere!

In more recent years we have global warming and the number of scientifically verifiable disaster scenarios has increased at an alarming rate. We could add meteorites crashing into the earth to destroy most of us, continental plates knocking together and drifting, overpopulation and – of course – global terrorism. You can probably think of more examples of credible ways in which

life as we know it may fall apart.

Dystopian projections seem to answer a need in us to see the worst consistently happening. Sometimes it appears we almost enjoy contemplating these prospects. Our fear responses are similar to those of the middle ages when doomsday itself seemed to be just around the corner, arising out of the Black Death pandemic.

Are these gloomy views always valid? Is an ongoing pessimism a healthy attitude to take? There are so many potential horrors being presented to us today that they almost cancel each other out. After all, as individuals we cannot worry about everything that might happen in the future.

If we reject utopia as a state of being possible, should we not take a similar view of dystopia? Both are extremes that we should not allow to dominate our thinking and our living. But between the two – utopia on the one hand an impossible view of a perfect world, and dystopia on the horrors that may come, surely we don't want to always accept the latter view. Some optimism is clearly healthier and more level-headed than its opposite. As religious liberals, we need to affirm some uplifting possibilities that the future can be positive. I feel we should give three cheers for utopia, maybe unrealisable, but it is I believe more spiritually uplifting than dystopia. It's tracking a positive vision.

It was a piece of graffiti that made me think about these extremes. Most graffiti are ugly and pretty meaningless, but there are examples that are thought provoking. I once saw in Cork in Eire one that said, 'The Bank of Ireland makes road maps for the soul.' I'm still not certain exactly what it means. There are places where forms of graffiti have been scribbled over centuries; one of them is around the gates of Balliol College Oxford. Now scribed in chalk, but still as ever much disapproved of by the College authorities, the tradition continues. I once saw there this short statement in white chalk – 'Utopia is inside you'. Then, as now, it makes me think.

I believe this simple statement is profound. Unitarians affirm a belief in the individual and the importance of our internal spiritual life and vision. Even holding any form of theology or belief, or without either, 'Utopia is inside you' can be taken as valid. It counters an easily adopted dystopia that the world is so bad that you can only despair. It affirms that a positive internal vision can mould how we see and interpret the often-dreadful happenings around us, or those in prospect. Events may make our lives bleak but fostering utopia inside each of us is a spiritual aspiration of importance that will influence our everyday lives.

'Curse, bless, me now'

It's a time of waiting. I remember it as a child. After bonfire night the run up to Christmas. The damp air, the wet gloves, the sodden sports fields, the wellington boots, the smell of garden fires. That was then. This is now. That time is long gone, and the run up is ever more frantic. More buying, more food, more lights, more more. As I get older I find myself shifting towards a simpler sense of seasonality, a desire to celebrate the solstice, the coming of dark and then light, and to see in the repeating pattern of hope and renewal, everything we need to make a theology.

Here it is: the earth we live in, are made of and will die in, signals to us through its cycles of change all we need to know about time, loss and the beauty of this world to which we passionately need to belong. I know deep inside that this is one way of understanding Christmas, that waiting is a ritual; that light will always return.

Here's a story.

It was close to Christmas, about 15 years ago, and I was back in London from America where I was living, for a short break. At Charing Cross I got on a train for Lewisham, where my sister lives, to go and see her. It was late afternoon and the train was packed with shoppers, kids and a few commuters. There was almost nowhere to sit but I found a spot a little way across from a person whom no one wanted to be near – a rough looking man with matted hair and a shapeless mud-coloured jacket, white, early 40s maybe, drinking lager from a can. Not clear if he was homeless or just down on his luck. I sat diagonally across from him, one set of seats away. At the next stop another man gets on and – there being nowhere else to sit – has to sit opposite lager man. This man is very different – wearing a smart suit, carrying several bags that look like gifts, and with a mobile phone, on which he makes a call as soon as he gets settled. He speaks fast, talks loudly and laughs during the call. As he speaks lager man listens intently. The man with the mobile phone is black and, from what I hear, I think he is African. As the man in the suit puts the phone away, the other man leans forward and says to him, 'That's my language too'. Mobile phone man registers but doesn't respond. 'It's my first language'. No response. 'My parents were missionaries'. Perhaps mobile phone man gives a slight nod I don't remember – but I do remember the urgency, and the emotion in the other man's voice. The train slows. The man in the suit gets up and goes to the door, bags in hand. Now there's a charge in the air. The rough looking man is still leaning forward intently and then suddenly he speaks, and he speaks not in English but in what is clearly the language of the phone call because the suited man snaps to attention, whips round and puts down his bags and, as the other rises and moves towards him, he steps forward and folds him into his arms in an embrace that brings tears to my eyes – and no one else appears to notice. And the embrace – if I could describe it, it was like ... a mother greeting her long-lost son; brothers separated by war; the prodigal son. They laugh, they hug, they touch each other's arms, they hold each other in a long handshake. And just as suddenly, it's over. Train stops, the doors open. Mobile phone man picks up

RISING GREEN

By Claire MacDonald



his bags, steps out and is gone.

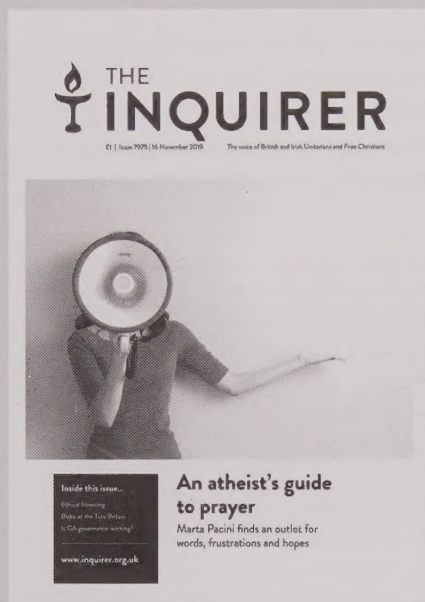
I carry that story with me. I have told it several times. It has pain and joy at its heart. It contains a blessing and, if you like, a curse. Finding and losing. Homelessness in its biggest sense. Loving encounter. Damaging echoes of colonialism. I think it's also a story about destiny. The former United Nations secretary Kofi Annan said that our destiny is held in 'the great project of trying to live together'. And failing. Did I say that? And failing. Again. I told it in November 2017 at the opening of Durham's *Lumiere* festival, at a conference on 'what's left to believe in'. I told the story and then I talked about two people who have influenced my thinking about how we encounter one another, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah and the theologian Ivan Illich.

In 1973 the Jesuit social thinker Ivan Illich coined the term 'tools for conviviality'. He was thinking about the difference between those things we use that allow our humanity to flourish and those that lay waste to the world. Convivial tools work without de-humanising. They need to be repairable and durable, widely available, simple and environmentally friendly. They might be soft tools such as conversation or collaborative art making, as well as bicycles or pencils, for instance. Kwame Anthony Appiah has written about *conversation*, which he claims as one of the most important tools we have in 'the great project of trying to live together'. He says that the etymological roots of conversation lie in 'living together', dealing with one another, conducting ourselves. Conversation is a convivial tool. Conversation takes place on the horizon between what we know and what we don't. It may in its way be a sacred act. It is at least an act of hope. And the rough looking man? He went back to his seat and was slumped there when I got off. And now I have told you the story, yet there was so much in that encounter – brief, highly charged, joyful – that I could not understand. Over so fast. A harsh blessing. We have stories and we are witnesses to stories. We are tellers of stories and carriers of stories. And telling a story too may be in its way a sacred act. It is at least an act of hope.



A few ideas for *The Inquirer*

Mary Jones
Plymouth Unitarian Church



To the Editor › Following an in-house congregational meeting in our Plymouth Unitarian church recently, I was invited to instigate an inquiry into the never indifferent, inattentive nor incomprehensible incantations included in the fortnightly *Inquirer*.

As I'm not an indigenous Unitarian but an incomer of incredibly short time – two years – from having been an incurably inconvenient Anglican, I'll try not to be inclined to intrude with individualistic nor interrogative interpolations – there are few in-words for being a boat-rocker!

I am incapable of remaining incognito and intrepidly invite responses from

those who input into *The Inquirer* or, like me, read this not insignificant publication. Incidentally, during initial inroads and insights into Unitarian infrastructures, I involved myself intrepidly over instant coffee (indescribably delicious) – at Unitarian gatherings – inundating myself with intention to investigate all back copies of the indubitable *Inquirer* and *Unitarian*, incarcerated in the cupboards at the back of churches. Inspired and in awe I read the intriguing, innovative inclusions in front of my eyes; incidentally never finding inconsistent dogma nor creed therein. So, now to the point! Having noted the demise of the *Unitarian* magazine, our congregational discussion was much varied and as a result ventures to raise some points and ask the following questions through me.

- Could there be more inclusion of colour in the magazine – Unitarianism is after all renowned for not being black and white. Perhaps this is down to cost?
- When the *Unitarian* and *The Inquirer* co-existed were there differing criteria for each publication?
- Some commented that *The Inquirer* seemed somewhat overly academic in nature so...
- Could *The Inquirer* be more of a combination of those two publications?
- Might it contain shorter, more diverse articles, humour sent in from readers, short items of news, requests, events, anecdotes from other Unitarian churches?
- Could longer articles be printed on consecutive pages – some found the page-hopping off-putting.
- If the *Inquirer* is at risk, might a trial of a monthly publication with a more diverse nature, be a possibility?

Just some ideas from Plymouth sent with love and gratitude for all your hard work.

Grateful for donations

Tessa Forsdike
Ipswich Meeting House

To the Editor › We at the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House would like to thank everyone who has sent in letters and emails of support for our grant application for funding to restore and preserve our Grade 1 listed building. We are very grateful – also to those who included a donation with their message.

All the evidence was sent in and duly considered, but the decision about awarding us a grant has been deferred until the beginning of January. Apparently this does sometimes happen as more information is required, so we have to be patient ... but this does give us another chance to gather even more evidence of the importance of our Meeting House to our community far and near, as well as for our own congregation.

So if anyone still has a message of support, please will you send it to tessa@tessajordan.co.uk or by post to Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House, c/o Tessa Forsdike, 48 Crabbe Street, Ipswich, IP4 5HS. We understand that the volume of evidence will affect the donor's decision on awarding the grant, so it really is a case of 'the more the merrier' in this festive time of year!

Thank you all so much.

Maud Robinson and Sheffield congregations create mutual commitment

By Robert Ince

On a beautiful autumn day, with the sun shining brightly across the picturesque Rivelin valley, Stannington and Fulwood congregations and joined by friends from the other Sheffield and District congregations gathered at Underbank Chapel for a service of mutual commitment with their new minister, the Rev Maud Robinson.

The Rev Ernest Baker led the service and the Rev Liz Birtles gave Council to the Congregation. It had also been planned that Rev Bill Darlinson would give Council to the Congregation but a fatal accident on the M1 prevented him from coming. With plenty of singing (we had 3 organists!), wonderful poetry and shared food afterwards, mutual commitments were made looking to a bright new future of ministerial and congregational co-operation within the city.

Ernest Baker, one-time minister at Stannington commented 'We have moved on since I was first minister here and the congregation is constantly renewing itself. This is the start of another new chapter for both congregations. I tend to judge these events by the volume of the chatter afterwards and there was plenty of that. The people of Fulwood and Stannington are certainly engaged and looking to a bright future for themselves and for the city of Sheffield.'

Reflecting on the service, Maud said 'Formally celebrating setting out on a new journey together can be a powerful experience, and our service of Mutual Commitment to Ministry was such for me. Joining with members of both congregations as well as Unitarians from other congregations in the Sheffield and District Association and further afield to sing, *We'll share our joys, our sorrows share, becoming as we do. We all can grow. We can become, our finer selves set free.* was a

powerful statement of what is possible when we come together in love. Our world seems to be in a confused and sometimes dark place and the Rev Elizabeth Birtles acknowledged this reassuring us again and again with the refrain, *each day we are given the chance to love more.* No matter how much of a failure we feel we've made of life and ministry, even over a long period of time, we can wake up the next day and begin with the words, *each day we are given the chance to love more.* Sometimes we need to hang on to this as we aspire to build beloved community and all that can flow from this. Today Sheffield District has found renewed energy vitalised by action on environmental and interfaith activities, supporting LGBT community and supporting the Old Chapel at Great Hucklow.



Shown above: Maud Robinson and guests at the service of commitment. Photo provided by Robert Ince

Women's League holds successful rally

By Barbara Clifford

This year's Women's League Rally was held in Whalley Abbey, near Preston on 22-23 October. It is a beautiful tranquil setting which allowed us to give plenty of thought to our meetings. We are privileged to have a past-Unitarian General Assembly President, Joyce Ashworth, as our president-elect this year. She gave an interesting and well-thought-out service on the potential within each of us to change the world, and the need for each of us to find this within.

Another past GA president, the Rev Ann Peart, spoke to the group about the book she recently edited, *Unitarian Women: A Legacy of Dissent*. She told the stories of a few Unitarian women and took questions from the floor. She pointed out that although women ministers have been around for many decades, since there have been no recordings of their ministerial work, the perception has been that it is mainly male ministers that do things – and that being a minister was 'man's work'. The writers in this book have attempted to provide some of the missing history that will help to redress this perspective. We thank Ann for this wonderful book and sharing her insights on this subject. At our business meeting we discussed our Project for 2020-2021. The Project 'Emmaus', a charity that helps homeless

people, was chosen and local Leagues will be working to publicise this charity's work in their congregations and to raise money to present to Emmaus at our AGM in 2021.

In the meantime, we still continue to fundraise for Smile Train, our project for 2019-2020. Since 1976 League members have raised over £255,000, but new ideas about raising money locally are always welcome – please contact our new Secretary, Mrs Joan Macfarlane (tel 0161-460-5192, email: jomac14@hotmail.co.uk)



Shown above: WL rally participants. Photo by John Clifford

What's on at Walmsley?

By Susan Jordan

Well we have been happily busy here in Bolton at Walmsley Unitarian Chapel, with lots to celebrate and lots of fellowship and love.

After major works last year we are now 'tidying up' with a total revamp of the minister's room, and the creation of a 'Quietspace' upstairs.

We always find time to celebrate and enjoy our 'Walmsley family'. There was no greater evidence of this than in June, when we welcomed baby Anoushka at her blessing ceremony, conducted by the Rev Helen Mills. Anoushka, mum Tina and dad Phil were surrounded and supported by family and friends. The readings were diverse and varied, full of love and positivity – including Hindu prayers said by Anoushka's grandma.

We joined after the service to enjoy a time for food, fellowship and music, and conversation flowed freely and delightfully.

We also celebrated our 306th Anniversary Service in June. We were honoured and delighted that the Rev Celia Cartwright, Unitarian General Assembly (GA) president, led our service of thanks. It was a beautiful, thought-provoking and celebratory service as Celia took us through the history of Unitarianism and she challenged us not to be complacent. We also joined with the congregation of Stand Unitarian



Shown above: GA President Celia Cartwright (right) celebrates at Walmsley

Chapel in the welcoming ceremony for their new minister, the Rev Shammy Webster. Shammy and her wife Pat are held in great affection by all at Walmsley and we were delighted to be invited to share in this special event.

Our autumn and winter events include a brass band musical extravaganza, apple pressing, a handbags and wine evening and our Christmas Fair.

So, as you can see, we're always brilliantly busy at Walmsley.

Minister weds at Bury

By Anne Mills

On 5 October the minister at Bury Unitarian Church, Kate McKenna, and her partner, Adrian Brady, were married. What a splendid occasion it was too! More than 100 people attended the ceremony and the attendant refreshments, and it was pleasing to see the church nicely full. This was a special day for everyone, and the ceremony reflected that: music, readings, sermon, and specific wedding elements all combined to perfection. The Rev Cody Coyne's sermon brought laughter and a tear in the eye, as he reminded us that love was the most



Shown above: Cody Coyne leads Kate McKenna and Adrian Brady in their vows.

Photo by John Hewerdine

important element in the world, by quoting songs such as 'Love is all around' and 'Love is in the air'.

Kate and Ade blessed each other with water – an important personal tradition for them. They also particularly wished their first act as a married couple to involve the sharing of bread with the congregation. Twelve ministers assisted with distributing the bread, and it was good to witness their support of the bride – their colleague and friend. And the couple had the distinction of being legally married by no less a personage than the Unitarian General Assembly vice president, as Anne Mills is one of the Authorised Persons for the church.

Over and above all these elements, however, what was most impressive was the care and concern demonstrated by Kate and Ade for all their guests. They appreciated the presence of everyone there, but we appreciated their kindness, warmth, generosity and hospitality, throughout the day. To say that a good time was had by all is a considerable understatement! Personal wedding presents were not requested; instead, Kate and Ade asked for donations to charity, and items for homeless people and the local food bank, and each guest received a thoughtfully chosen and compiled box of favours, as a reminder of the day.

To Kate and Ade, Bury Unitarians and all their wedding guests express their thanks for a wonderful day, and offer them congratulations, love and very best wishes, as they embark upon their married life together.